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The Lives of American Japanese in World War II Internment Camps

The bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, a military action done to prevent the interference of American forces upon the Empire of Japan's expansion in the Pacific, not only brought the full might of the American military into World War II, but also one of the most controversial executive orders given by the President of the United States. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued the Executive Order 9066, "Authorizing the Secretary of War to prescribe military areas, whereas the successful prosecution of the war requires every possible protection against espionage and against sabotage to national-defense material, national-defense premises, and national-defense utilities" (Roosevelt, 1942, p.1). As historian Donald Hata states, "By the summer of 1942, virtually the entire Nikkei (Japanese American) population on the U.S. mainland – 110,000 men, women, and children – had vanished from their homes, schools, and places of employment in cities and rural communities throughout the coastal areas of the Pacific Coast states. Among the Nikkei who disappeared under U.S. Army guard were 40,000 Issei (first generation immigrants from Japan) and 70,000 Nisei (second generation), the American-born sons and daughters of the Issei" (Hata, 1974, p. 1). The lives of the prisoners of war would never be the same again, and I hope in writing this paper to show the lengths the American government went in their efforts to indoctrinate the Nikkei and assimilate them to the American culture and way of life.

My goal in writing this paper is to explain the injustice done to the Japanese-Americans who were affected by Executive Order 9066. In the first section I am going to show the passing of Executive Order 9066 and the initial impact on the Nisei. Secondly, I am going to show life within the camps including living conditions, education, and the cultural impact. Finally, I will go over the Nisei's journey back into society after the end of World War II.

Historical Context

Prior to World War II we see the groundwork laid for the anger and resentment the Issei and Nisei held toward America in the early 1920s into the 1940s. In 1924 the American government passed the federal immigration bill which banned Japanese immigration. "The federal immigration bill of 1924 had such a negative public reception in Japan that many scholars of U.S. - Japanese foreign relations view its passage as one of the first steps in the increasingly inexorable confrontations that led to World War II" (Hata, 1974, p.9). The passage of this bill had a more personal and dramatic effect upon the Nikkei living on the Pacific coast of America. Many Japanese-Americans dealt with brutal and crushing racism, even trying to label their children as "200 percent Americans," overcompensating to ease the wrath of racial prejudices they had to deal with a daily basis. Even before Pearl Harbor, the treatment of the Nikkei as outsiders had been occurring for more than two decades, "As newsreels and newspapers publicized Japan's military aggression and occupation in China throughout the 1930s, most Americans saw little difference between the increasingly ruthless image of Imperial Japan and fellow Americans of Japanese ancestry. Therefore, on the eve of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, despite their genuine efforts to assimilate into American culture, the Nikkei lived as strangers in their own land" (Hata, 1974, p.12). World War II brought unprecedented racism to a national scale, and changed the lives of Japanese-Americans forever.

While Pearl Harbor still smoked and tried to grasp the extent of the damage and loss of life, government agents from multiple agencies were already taking Japanese-Americans into custody and deeming them threats to national security, “thus it was that in the conduct of a war waged for white supremacy, according to U.S. planners, against imperial Japan, some 120,000 Japanese-Americans - two-thirds of whom were U.S. citizens (the remainder were prohibited from that citizenship by U.S. law) were forcibly and summarily removed from their homes and placed in concentration camps for the duration of the war” (Okihiro, 2006, p.52). The removal and subsequent imprisonment was done for the effort of protecting the United States of America from an invasion led by so-called treasonous Japanese-Americans already living upon our shores and the guidelines for imprisonment were if they are Japanese, take them into custody, “They were not accused of any crime other than the presumed ‘fact’ of their ‘race.’ One drop of ‘Japanese blood’ justified that racial profiling, according to the U.S. government” (Okihiro, 2006, p. 52-53). The United States government bases for laws and orders for the imprisonment of Japanese-Americans were solely based in the racial superiority Americans felt towards multiple races in America. As a general in charge of the defense of the West Coast explained, “The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born on United States soil, possessed of United States citizenship, have become ‘Americanized,’ the racial strains are undiluted” (Okihiro, 2006, p.53). He continued, “A viper is nonetheless a viper wherever the egg is hatched - so a Japanese-American, born of Japanese parents - grows up to be a Japanese, not an American” (Okihiro, 2006, p.53). This statement epitomizes the United States in the 1940s, and shows the flawed government system in which we passed the laws to subjugate hundreds of thousands of Japanese-Americans.

On February 19, 1942, Franklin D. Roosevelt issued the Executive Order 9066 authorizing the placement of Japanese-Americans into concentration camps, under the guise of national security. As Major General Allen W. Gullion and John McCloy wrote to Secretary of War Henry Stimson on February 6th, “from reliable reports from military and other sources, the danger of Japanese-inspired sabotage is great. ... No half-way measures based upon considerations of economic disturbance, humanitarianism, or fear of retaliation will suffice” (Hata, 1974, p. 15). Japanese-Americans had no resources or means to fight the complete and total disregard for the personal rights, “Nikkei were faced with the dilemma of accepting the mass expulsion order or challenging the awesome resources of an explicitly racist and paranoid government.” (Hata, 1974, p. 17) Executive Order 9066 was passed with the full and total support of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and was claimed that the reasoning behind the issuance of the order as a “military necessity” and as California’s Attorney General Earl Warren stated, “I believe that we are just being lulled into a false sense of security and the only reason we haven’t had a disaster in California is because it has been timed for a different date ... Our day of reckoning is bound to come in that regard” (Hata, 1974, p. 16) he continued, “every citizen must give up some of his rights in wartime, and it is absolutely constitutional” (Hata, 1974, p.16). We see the view of the majority of Americans in power, the complete and total alienation of the Japanese-Americans and the justification of violating multiple civil rights, because of the rampant and unproven claims of an invasion led by Japanese-Americans.

Life Within the Internment Camps. As of August 1942 the majority of Japanese-Americans had been placed into makeshift campsites with little to no privacy, “Japanese-Americans remained in the temporary camps for up to sixth months, just long enough to adjust to their makeshift detention, at which point they were boarded onto antiquated railway cars with shades

drawn and under military guard and sent to destinations unknown to them, arriving at the permanent camps – the so-call relocation centers – situated in the barren wastelands of the interior” (Tateishi, 1984, p. 22). I find it highly ironic that we as a country were so shocked and appalled to the trains that transported the Jewish population to the death camps of Europe, and we employed the same methods to imprison a people we deemed harmful and destructive. The camps were of the poorest quality and unfit for living, but as our government had shown there was nothing that could stop the momentum of racism, fear, and the unknown.

Upon arrival to their concentration camp, individuals were immediately put to work constructing barracks and living quarters, not for themselves but for the American soldiers and personnel assigned to keep watch, “Inside the ‘Relocation Centers,’ War Relocation Authority (WRA) administrators and staff were housed in spacious and well-furnished residential facilities constructed by the inmates. All other living quarters in the camps were crude and austere black tarpaper barracks built to the specifications used to house single male Army recruits” (Hata, 1974, p. 23). As with many Army barracks everything was communal, no privacy, just individuals piled into a room and exposed, as one former inmate states and I feel it deserves to be written in length:

We lined up together for everything - cheek to cheek, tit to tit, and butt to butt. In order to build partitions to separate families, or kids from married couples, we first hung blankets or pieces of cloth. But it was cold, we needed the blankets. Later, us kids slipped into the restricted lumber area and stole wood. But even then everyone could hear everything – from whispered lovemaking, to farts and family arguments ... day after day, week after week ... (Hata, 1974, p. 23)

With the close proximity of families and the nature of life within the camps led to many

confrontations, fighting, and riots.

As we have seen throughout history pushing people to the edge can have two consequences harm to themselves and harm to others. The violence not located at one location but at multiple camps, “At Santa Anita Assembly Center, the famous racetrack converted into a temporary detention center, a minor riot broke out because of a food shortage; at Tule Lake, a pro-American element fought with a smaller dissident group, and both were subdued by military guards; and at Manzanar, a riot occurred when residents discovered that a food shortage in the camp resulted from guards and authorities selling food on the black market” (Tateishi, 1984, p. 22). The United States Government had isolated, imprisoned, and degraded Japanese-Americans and decided to take it one step further in their goal of repurposing the Nikkei, “The government rubbed salt in the wound of racism by asking the excluded to prove their merit and worth by serving in the U.S. Armed Forces” (Okihiro, 2006, p. 72). The two questions that were associated with the largest outbreak of violence within all ten camps, “the infamous questions 27 and 28 asked, first, if the respondent was ‘willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States in combat duty,’ and second, if, after swearing allegiance to the United States, he or she would ‘fore swear any form of alliance or obedience to the Japanese emperor’ or any other foreign government” (Tateishi, 1984, p. 23). It was these two questions that created the greatest divide amongst the Japanese, and created widespread violence due to the divide that occurred amongst the imprisoned.

This is the degradation that hard-working Japanese-Americans were put through in the name of national security. The indignity that the parents faced was pain enough, but the education of their children inside the camps shows the extent of American reconstituting of the young Japanese-Americans and justifying the deletion of the native culture. From the initial start of the internment camps in 1942 through 1945, an estimated 30,000 school-aged children were

displaced in camp schools, “schools that attempted to preserve some semblance of educational normalcy in what was, at its very core, a deeply irregular situation obviously fraught with injustice and paradox.” (Wu, 2007, p. 238) But the underlining historical record of the educational practices show different, “that a significant force in camp students’ education was that dominant ideology that the government tried to perpetuate through reading and writing assignments: that the evacuation was a necessary means for national security” (Wu, 2007, p. 238). The War Relocation Authority had aims to create a curriculum that would give the children every chance of succeeding in life, but this was fraught with misinformation and confusion, and their goals were aimed for one reason, justifying the relocation and imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of Japanese-American, and I fill their goals is only justified in its full text:

“The history of America is one of continuous relocation. The story of the incessant movement of the American people from east to west, from north to south, from farm to city, has always been a thrilling tale of continuous readjustment to new environments. It has always been fraught with dangers and difficulties. It requires boldness and courage to make readjustments. The boys and girls must come to see this as a part of the American heritage. Through history and literature, they can become part of America. Americans have never settled in one spot. Few of us live where we were born. Few of our fathers do either. Far greater dangers confronted the pioneers who were always moving westward than confront the people in relocating. The spirit of America is in such pioneering. (U.S. War Relocation Authority, Community)” (Wu, 2007, p. 245).

That is the history lesson pushed by the War Relocation Authority to the Japanese-Americans they imprisoned. By correlating the expansionism of early America and manifest destination, to the horrendous living conditions and disrespect for basic human rights shows the disconnect of

the United States government and the methods they employed. The Nikkei of the Pacific Coasts dealt with debilitating humiliation and saw the efforts of the so-called educators to repurpose their children and erase any semblance of Japanese heritage all in the name of justice and safety.

The Closing of the Internment Camps. With the war coming to an end, the camps were still heavily populated with Issei (First-Generation Japanese), but due to the allowance of young adults to leave the camp for college, farm work, and serve in the armed forces, the majority of the remaining people were either elderly or very young. When the Japanese Imperial Army was no longer a threat there were still twenty percent of Japanese-Americans were held in concentration camps. When the final prisoners were forced out of the internment camps they were faced with unrelenting racism and no means to create a career to support themselves or loved ones, not until 1948 would they see any sign of hope for their lives in America, “President Harry S. Truman signed the Japanese (American) Evacuation Claims Act, some returnees became more hopeful about rebuilding their businesses, but the law provided no more than token compensation. The law 1948 law was restricted to losses of real property, and the mere \$38 million appropriated by Congress to settle 26,568 claims totaling 148 million resulted in inadequate staffing and frustrating delays in the processing of claims” (Hata, 1974, p. 40). The lives of the Nikkei would never be the same, and the continued hatred aimed at the returnees was tremendous, “the returnees always faced the real threat of physical violence in the cities as well as in the suburbs and rural areas. Shots were fired from cars at returnee residences in the middle of the night. Anonymous phone callers warned Nikkei merchants that their shops would be dynamited, and in many cases the threats were carried out. For many who returned to the West Coast, the long-awaited homecoming became another chapter in the nightmare that had begun in the winter of 1941 and spring of 1942” (Hata, 1974, p. 41).

The imprisonment and repurposing of the Japanese-Americans is a dark time in the history of the United States and not until 1990 did they receive a formal apology from the United States government for the wrongs and injustices done. In my reading through numerous articles and books, I came across a quote that I feel brings a sense of closure to this paper and it written by Albert Memmi from his book *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, “I am unconditionally opposed to all forms of oppression. For me, oppression is the greatest calamity of humanity. It diverts and pollutes the best energies of man - of oppressed and oppressor alike. For if colonization destroys the colonized, it also rots the colonizer” (Nakanishi, 2009, p. 52). When looking back on World War II and the relationship between the American government and the Japanese-Americans along with Imperial Japan; the level of disrespect, racism, and total lack of civil rights shown through the imprisonment of Japanese-American and the total disregard for human life with the use of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki shows the lengths a government will go in justifying what they call “safety.” Throughout history we have retreaded the same abuses to humans we deem a threat to our way of life, and have approved extreme measures in justifying the suppression and violence that led to the end of the threat. Even as we sit here in the twenty-first century we see the acts of governments that we deem unethical and violent continuing based in the belief that what they are doing is right. History shows us our mistakes, which we are supposed to learn from, but we have shown no ability to grow and learn from the horrible mistakes we have committed.

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